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Continuous Inquiry Meets Continued Critique: The Professional Learning Community In Practice And The Resistance Of (Un)willing Participants

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Objectives

The term Professional Learning Community is commonplace, and it holds many meanings and suggestions. For the purpose of this essay, however, we discuss a specific Professional Learning Community (PLC) that was established in a high school, fifteen months prior to the application of a survey instrument to evaluate participants' perceptions on the initiative. The PLC that we evaluate in this article had a set of very specific goals: To create a department within a high school where collaboration would become a norm and not a rarity, and to encourage collaboration that would include designing formative and summative assessments, collecting, comparing, and disaggregating student data to enhance classroom practices and meet students' needs. Most importantly, maximizing student achievement is the long-term goal for this endeavor (Elbousty & Bratt, 2009).

The PLC concept started as a result of collaboration among a few faculty members. Several teachers began to plan assessments, ask strategic questions, and analyze student data together. In this way, the PLC developed without a strong structure and without external parameters. However, when the school principal realized that the teachers were collaborating, he decided to lend his support by scheduling a common hour during which the teachers could meet during the school day, providing resources and materials to help the teachers understand the theoretical basis for learning communities, and encouraging teachers to participate. Once the collaborating teachers received this official recognition, there was pressure on all of the teachers in the department to participate. Because of this grassroots, uneven inception, the interest among participating teachers was quite varied: from teachers who expressed an enthusiasm for the project to teachers who attended grudgingly. Teachers were not required to attend PLC meetings, although because the school had granted the teachers an extra hour for the meetings, there was a high, if unstated, social pressure to attend.

The community used various professional sources to inform their practices. They began to conduct their own research to better understand the PLC concept and its implementation stages. Once the PLC received official support, the teachers were assisted in their research as the department chair offered articles and resources. Some of the teachers consulted DuFour, et al, in their work on school-based initiatives. Thus, some of the participants became familiarized with the existing literature on the Professional Learning Community.

The researchers approached the members of the community with various questions that sought an evolving understanding of why many teachers prefer to work in isolation rather than in collaboration. As we evaluated their preferences, we wondered: can we guarantee better results with collaboration? Should we respect a teacher's desire to work alone? Under what circumstances might we encourage collaboration? An evaluation of one evolving PLC, we hoped, would begin to provide answers to these important questions.

Theoretical framework

In the creation of a Professional Learning Community (PLC), the values and goals of the school should become commonly shared among the faculty, students, and surrounding community (Clark, Read, McGree, & Fernandez, 1993; DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Karhanek, 2004; Hord, 1977, 1997; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006). Linda Darling-Hammond (1995) explains that the PLC is an essential component of school improvement because it helps the school personnel stay cohesive and focused on teaching and learning issues. Astuto (1993) explains that within a learning community, teachers and administrators continuously seek learning and act on what they learn.

Hord (1997) identifies five attributes of professional learning communities. These attributes are: 1) supportive and shared leadership, sometimes called distributive leadership, in which teachers and administrators collaborate in decision making; 2) shared values and vision centering upon students' learning; 3) collective learning and application of learning, as teachers collaborate and learn from each other on a quotidian basis; 4) supportive conditions, as the school environment plays a role in community development; 5) shared personal practice, as teachers discuss their teaching practices with specific students and any emerging challenges.

Within the PLC, teachers have various tasks to complete together, beginning with an assessment of shared values, followed by the development of common assessments. As the learning community develops and common practice informs these decisions, teachers can discuss the shortcomings of their assessment frameworks and develop strategies to help students master more difficult concepts. Dufour suggests that teachers should work in collaboration when devising formative and summative assessments (Anderson & Larson, 2009; DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Karhanek, 2004; Freidus & Grose, 1998; Hord, 1977, 1997; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001, 2006).

The guiding questions of the PLC are few but essential to the success of the collaboration: What do we expect our students to learn? How will we know they have learned it? How will we administer common assessments and analyze results as a group? How will we identify and implement improvement strategies? How might we celebrate strengths and successes? (DuFour & DuFour, 2004).

Through the PLC, teachers establish a milieu where they develop common assessments, compare their responses to student work, and conduct peer observations of one another. In peer observations, teachers observe each other and conference among them about best practices and feasible methods of implementation highlight the work of one or two authors on this list, showing where their writings illuminate this concept. (Anderson & Larson, 2009; DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Karhanek, 2004; Freidus & Grose, 1998; Hord, 1977; Hord, 1997; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006). In the case of this particular school, located in an urban district in an eastern U.S. city, some teachers have not embraced all of these ideas, while others have found them relevant and helpful to their growth as teachers. Whether or not they embrace the PLC model, the teachers meet on a regular basis to identify practical methods to enhance the quality of student's work and critique each other.

In an ideal learning community, teachers are engaged in deep levels of inquiry; they are primarily focused on students' learning, and they are willing to devise strategies to assist struggling students. Most importantly, they work together to teach all students rather than relegating the responsibility for each student with a single teacher. Louis and Kruse (2004) postulate that, "a core characteristic of the professional learning community is an undeviating focus on student learning" (p. 9). A successful learning community shares best practices on a daily basis to improve their work. They calibrate their

grades by looking at student work together and engaging in discussion about evaluation. McLaughlin and Talbert (2006) concur that it is crucial that teachers examine students' work to identify their strengths and weaknesses to ensure students' success.

The PLC we evaluated began in the prior school year, and quickly burgeoned into a fairly productive group, not limiting their community to their own confines but also expanding to provide assistance to the middle school teachers and other high school colleagues. This paper will outline our evaluation of an evolving PLC model.

Context

The Professional Learning Community (PLC) was implemented over a period of one school year, and it had been sustained into the second school year for two months when this survey was conducted.

The creation of this PLC was described by one of its members as follows:

The first step was to share stories of positive outcomes in other Professional Learning Communities by exposing the staff to current research. At an initial department meeting, an informal conversation began to build support for the initiative. Participants were asked to brainstorm their ideas. One member took notes at this meeting, and sent these notes to all participants. In consonance with Hord and Hirsch's guidelines for starting a PLC (2009), participants were asked to read an article about Professional Learning Communities that formed the basis of discussion for the next meeting. At subsequent meetings, department members continued to clarify the theories that form the basis of the PLC model and discuss expectations of what we might achieve in our particular school context. The entire department was encouraged to participate in this professional learning community.

Data sources and evidence

We surveyed the teachers to see whether they regarded their collaboration as beneficial to their teaching practice. The survey was developed to provide an opportunity for the department members involved in the PLC initiative to voice their reactions about the PLC construct. The survey was distributed to the participants on the same day. This survey asked eight multiple-choice questions with space to further explain responses and provide rationale; additionally, we asked seven questions that required paragraph- or sentence-length responses. We note here that the response rate was higher than we originally expected with 67% of teachers responding.

Our survey was distributed to all nine of the teachers taking part in the PLC initiative. Each question was designed to elicit responses regarding the teachers' attitudes toward collaboration, asking them to try to remember their earliest memories of collaborative work as teachers, their initial responses to the PLC formation, and their current feelings about collaborating with colleagues. Of the nine teachers who received the survey, six responded: five were female and one was male. They were told that their answers would be anonymous and that their frankness and veracity would be highly appreciated.

Results

When asked how long the teacher has been in practice, the range includes two teachers in the 0-5 years range, one in the 6-10 range, one in the 11-15 range, one in the 20-25 range, and one more than

30 years.

The first question asks the teachers to mark a statement that “accurately reflects your feelings” about working with colleagues. For this question, they were told that they could mark more than one answer. The teachers were completely varied in their response to this question. One marked that working with colleagues lessens the burden on each teacher; two marked that working with colleagues creates more work for certain people; three marked that working with colleagues saves time; one marked that working with colleagues wastes time, and one wrote in that her feelings about collaboration depend on the structure.

In their follow-up responses, the teachers who claim to value collaboration say that it helps them to alleviate stress, find sympathy from others, and brainstorm solutions to problems. Some of the teachers state that their colleagues offer useful insights into curriculum development and classroom management. One teacher explains that when colleagues divide the work, for example by sharing lesson plans, they save time. Other teachers, however, who marked that collaboration is not useful or a waste of time, explain that they prefer not to work with others. One teacher writes, “I try to explain to them how things should be done, but they do it their own way. I’d rather just work by myself and get things done. Some of my colleagues are chatty and unfocused.” Other teachers comment on the lack of equity in collaborative work, stating that they end up doing the work of others. One teacher states, “I do a lot of the work for other people, and the rest of the group gets credit for it. Maybe I should just do it by myself.” Another writes, similarly, “If there’s a lack of equity and a lack of structure, working alone is much easier. If we are working on a project but one of us ends up doing most of the work, it’s true that collaboration is not beneficial.”

When asked whether, as a classroom teacher, the respondent would rather work with the all colleagues including the supervisor, all colleagues, a few colleagues, or alone, four of the respondents indicate that they would prefer to work with a few colleagues, while two respond that they would rather work alone. Those who would prefer to work with a few colleagues express the need to work quickly and efficiently, and they write that they prefer to work with one colleague who teaches similar classes in a similar style. One states, “I would rather work with one or two than work with a crowd because a lot of ideas are lost in a crowd.” Another writes, “You get more done with fewer people, and you get more focused and concentrated, and it’s easier to reach a middle ground in a smaller group.” Between the two who prefer to work alone, one states, “I’d rather work alone so that I don’t waste my time. You’re away from animosity and resentment because sometimes when you work with people, you end up resenting them. If I work by myself, I know it’s going to be done.”

When asked whether teacher collaboration increases student achievement, results are spread fairly evenly across the spectrum, with “somewhat” being the most popular response: one marks “absolutely”; one marks “very much”; three marks “somewhat”; and one marks “not at all.” In their explanations, the teacher who marks “absolutely” writes, “Students have multiple unmet needs that might serve as barriers to their achievement. When teachers work together, they share different perspectives and practices. They broaden their perspectives and knowledge bases. Once this happens, a teacher is better equipped to adequately address students’ needs, help them overcome barriers to achievement.”

A correspondence develops between the two questions that ask teachers to evaluate whether the collaboration is useful to each teacher, personally, and whether the collaboration is useful to the entire department. While four of the teachers mark these questions similarly, by marking “somewhat” twice or

“very much” twice, two teachers indicate that the collaboration is much more useful to the team than it is to their personal growth. In their explanations, they indicate that they are very helpful to the team but that they are not receiving much in return.

When asked whether collaboration with colleagues “makes you a better teacher,” results are split between “very much” with three; “somewhat” with one; and “not at all” with two. When the question is asked about the strength of the entire department in general, results are slightly higher. To the question, “Do you think that collaboration strengthens your department?” One marks “absolutely,” three mark “very much,” and two mark “somewhat.” It may be worth noting here that no one responds “not at all” to that question, even though two express that the collaboration is “not at all” helpful in making them better teachers.

In their explanations, one teacher writes, “Collaboration informs my practice, as it is a process from which new knowledge is generated.” Another states that she has acquired many skills from the collaboration. One teacher writes that working together strengthens the efficacy of the group. Another states, “I’m not going to say absolutely, but I do believe that collaboration strengthens any department if it’s done the right way. Collaboration should be well-structured with an underlying goal.”

To the question, “Does everyone participate equally and fairly?” we receive responses that indicate problems with regards to feelings of inequity. Two teachers respond “never.” Two respond “sometimes.” Two respond “usually.” No one responds “always.”

When asked whether there are certain people that the teachers feel more comfortable working with, most teachers respond that they prefer to work with someone who is consonant in approach and teaching assignment and is responsive to working with them. One writes that s/he prefers to work with, “People with similar perspectives, people who appear approachable, people who seem to welcome my interruptions, people who give off the impression that interrupting someone by asking them work-related questions is a normal behavior.” Another writes, “We should have similar views, ideas, goals, and be able to discuss clearly what we want and why it’s important.” Another teacher states that s/he prefers someone to work with who is similar in “work ethic, understanding of curriculum, and realistic expectations.”

When asked how they feel when invited by an administrator to collaborate with other teachers, the responses are again quite varied. One teacher marks two of the selections: “Oh no! I have to spend more of my time and energy on pointless activities” and “Well, at the very least, I hope my supervisor brings food.” Two mark: “Great! I hope this is an opportunity to get to know my colleagues better” Three mark: “Hmmm... Let’s see if I can learn something here.” One adds that s/he has learned different teaching methods, ideas for classroom management, projects/activities, and working through problems together. One adds that s/he has learned methods and discipline techniques from colleagues. Another writes that s/he has learned how to work more effectively with students who carry a learning disability and has learned how to motivate kids to work for themselves. Another says that s/he has learned effective classroom management techniques.

When asked how their feelings about collaboration have changed in the past three years, the teachers respond, for the most part, that their feelings have not changed significantly. Most answer that they feel the same, even if their feelings are quite different from one another. Only one person says that her feelings have changed, but only “somewhat.” One person writes, “Same! I think that today’s teachers

want to work alone, want their own space, and want to concentrate on their own work. Sometimes they don't have enough time to finish their own work. Do you think that they have time to collaborate or do extra work with someone else? NO!" A second person states, "No, I have almost always recognized the value in collaborating with other people." A third person notes, "Somewhat. In a course I took, teachers collaborating had to brainstorm ideas to help solve a problem. Some ideas came up that I would never have thought of." Two people write, simply, "Same."

When asked, "Can you remember the first time you ever collaborated with your colleagues? Can you describe how you felt about that experience?" One answers, "Eleven years ago, during my first year of teaching, I felt good and more secure when I taught the same class that other teacher and we worked together and she had lesson plans. That was her first year too." Another answers, "Super! Learned a lot." Another answers, "It was a very positive experience; her strength complemented well with mine. Because we worked so closely together, she was in a position to judge my work. Her constructive criticism was very helpful as it made me a better worker." Another writes, "It was mostly me sharing my ideas with my colleagues."

Discussion

Most of our tallies from the survey indicate very little consensus among the teachers on any of the categories. Some teachers seem enthusiastic about collaborating with colleagues, while others express very negative feelings.

Regarding the impact of collaboration on student achievement, the range of responses indicates that some teachers feel that collaboration "absolutely" impacts student achievement while others feel that collaboration has no impact at all. Given this widest possible range of responses, it becomes difficult to gauge the success of the PLC in the eyes of teachers. Since teachers indicate that they prefer to work alone or with one other colleague, it seems that they had not developed much appreciation for the PLC at the time of the survey.

Furthermore, teachers express a sense of frustration about fairness and equity, often stating that collaboration with colleagues causes more work for them rather than ameliorating their difficulties. Such feelings of unfairness, no matter how large or small, pose significant threats to the development of the community. It is also noteworthy that, in all of these responses, positive feelings about collaboration are described as small group efforts, with only one colleague as co-collaborator. When large group efforts are mentioned, the attitude is generally negative, with six people stating negative comments.

Additionally, when teachers state that they would welcome collaboration, they describe their ideal collaborator as one person who is very similar to themselves and easily able to communicate and respond to their ideas. Obviously, this goal of working with one similar person defeats the purpose of the professional learning community. In a democratic institution, as a public school must aim to be, the teachers would embrace plurality and differing opinions rather than seek to work with people who are most like them. Again, these attitudes threaten the development of the learning community because they tend toward exclusive, rather than inclusive, behaviors.

It is certainly the case that a few teachers (in our survey, two of six) prefer to work in isolation, even when offered the opportunity to work with others. They view their solitude as beneficial to their work, and they view themselves as experts in their fields and in pedagogical practice. They feel that, for them,

to collaborate means to mentor less capable teachers. They state that they work diligently in isolation and that collaboration slows their progress. These forgoing instructors value their time and their independence, and any encroachment on their solitude is negatively viewed and unwelcome. They do not welcome nor seek out collaboration with their colleagues. The majority of participants (four of six), however, do prefer to work with a partner, viewing collaboration as a chance to learn and grow as a teacher. These questions address the tensions that so many teachers will recognize: we love our autonomy, but autonomy is not a virtue, and we know too well that the grudging attitudes can reinforce what is merely isolation: attitudes and practices that diminish and demean the prospects of an educational community. Our survey highlights that while two out of six teachers who feel working in isolation is beneficial, the others were more positive towards working in groups.

Seemingly, working in isolation seems beneficial to some teachers, and so there must be various reasons if this is the case. While teachers in this particular school have begun to work collaboratively, some still do so grudgingly, preferring their solitude.

We can unequivocally deduce from these responses that the teachers define the collaborative process from very different perspectives. Because these teachers are not in unison in their feelings about collaboration, the sustenance of the professional learning community seems most certainly threatened.

Michael Fullan has said that change nearly always encounters resistance. Certainly the PLC model will generally encounter initial resistance from veteran faculty used to working in isolation; paradoxically, however, as Richard Elmore tells us, resistance can be seen as strength of the model. According to Elmore, and we concur, much resistance can be seen as productive and helpful and can be further explored through responsive dialogue and careful, thoughtful acknowledgement.

According to current research on Professional Learning Communities, the initiation of the PLC should come from the membership, and the members should share leadership responsibilities. If ideas come from a single person or if change is initiated from a single person, the change may be short-lived and quickly undermined. If voluntary collaboration and shared governance is a real goal, then one step toward the goal must be to eliminate the idea of involuntary membership.

The PLC only works as well as the community works together (Toole & Louis, 2002; Bryck, 1994). There are competing metaphors that describe this difficult process. One is, "A rising tide raises all boats," meaning that we are stronger when we work together (DuFour, 2004); however, it also seems true that "water seeks the lowest level," meaning that there are times when the community seems in danger of losing ground or lowering its expectations as it seeks a difficult consensus. In either case, these water metaphors are particularly apt because creating a movement within a school can be, in many ways, like moving a large body of water: slow-moving, set in its ways, and difficult to contain. Navigating change while also keeping the group united is a real challenge.

The idea of shared values and collective learning is difficult to implement, though we continue to believe that it is worth the effort. Finding consensus regarding our shared vision at times seems nearly impossible because we are accustomed to highlighting our differences and our individuality. At times, admitting to a shared vision seems too much of a compromise of ourselves, too much of a capitulation. Insisting on consensus means asking people to give of themselves and to make compromises with one another. In the more extreme cases, it even means losing someone who might otherwise make a strong contribution but who is not willing to participate in consensus building. Finding a balance for the

group is a powerful and progressive movement, but like any movement is not without pain and struggle. These are the questions that instructional leaders must ponder on a quotidian basis as they plan to implement a feasible strategy for positive, communal reform.

As we begin to understand why teachers often prefer, or have become accustomed to, working alone rather than collaborating, we begin to anticipate thoughtful and reasoned resistance that will help us to re-evaluate and negotiate our plans for building community. However, because research and practice have confirmed the need for community development, we persist in the idea that the community is a necessary force for public school work and essential to the success of the school. Because the school benefits greatly from collaboration, we seek ways to convince teachers of the efficacy of community building: they must see results when they make the effort to collaborate, and the community must make every effort to use their time wisely and treat time as a valuable resource.

Significance

If the PLC is established successfully, one can witness a culture that is grounded in collaboration, where teachers work together continuously to assess student strategies, assist each other in developing new methods and approaches to improve students' achievement, discuss issues and concerns openly, create a supportive environment conducive to achievement, and confer about their pedagogical approaches (Crow, Hausman, & Scribner, 2002; DuFour & Eaker, 1998; DuFour, Eaker, & DuFour, 2005; Hord, 1997, 2009; Toole & Louis, 2002).

In such an environment of collaboration, the Professional Learning Community assures that when students are not demonstrating an efficacious or enthusiastic approach to learning, the pressure is not solely on one teacher. Motivation becomes a collective issue where the entire staff collaborates to engender solutions. DuFour (2004) states that:

We contend that a school truly committed to the concept of learning for each student will stop subjecting students to a haphazard, random, de facto, educational lottery program when they struggle academically. It will stop leaving the critical questions, 'How will we respond when a student is not learning?' to the discretion of each teacher. It will instead develop consistent, systematic procedures that ensure each student is guaranteed additional time and support (p. 33).

If the PLC is successfully implemented, the staff will acquire a collective response to any academic issue encountered by students. Thus, learning is discussed among the school community, and learning becomes the center of adult discussions.

Even though we heartily disagree that working in isolation produces optimum results, we also understand that custom and habit are strong determiners of teacher practice. However, we firmly contend that there is no reason to defend teacher practice if it works counter to students' learning and achievement. McLaughlin and Talbert (2001) argue that the ethos of teaching must change, from a conservative and individualist perspective to a focus on innovation and collaboration. They state that teachers will need to question their widely-held values. In spite of our findings that indicate that teachers can be ambivalent about the benefits of collaboration, we continue to argue that the formation of the learning community and the collaborative efforts of teachers are essential if we are to ensure the success of every student in public schools. These initiatives are time consuming and often meet resistance, but over time they generate successful results in schools.

Allowing students to sub-optimize their learning is an undeniable and unacceptable waste of human potential. Improving coordination among teachers and administrators has been proven to benefit students in their lives, with improved cognitive effects (learning) and non-cognitive effects (health, well being and safety). Anderson and Larson (2009) argue in a recent study that the need for collaborative efforts is urgent, especially in the case of schools in impoverished communities.

Within the Professional Learning Community construct, students will benefit from the ongoing collaboration of their teachers, as they will master the intended outcomes of the curriculum and be capable to transfer that learning to different milieus. Students will also develop 21st century skills, as they will master core content, effectively communicate, collaborate, work creatively, solve problems, and think critically. Students will be effectively engaged in constructing their knowledge with the guidance of a team of caring adults. Further, students will be provided support and a plethora of opportunities to succeed.

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